LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.

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International Catalogue of Scientific Literature.

THE Conjoint Board of Scientific Societies, some time last year, appointed—by what mandate is not clear—an International Catalogue Sub-Committee "to obtain information regarding the extent of the use made by scientific men of the present International Catalogue of Scientific Literature, and to obtain recommendations for possible improvement." The sub-committee consisted of Dr. Chalmers Mitchell, Mr. C. V. Boys, and Mr. E. B. Knobel, in addition to the official members. The sub-committee appears to have gone outside the terms of reference and to have reported "that it was advisable to consider suggestions for an alternative scheme." On February 25, the secretary of the sub-committee sent out a circular letter to certain scientific and technical societies, from which I reproduce the three opening paragraphs:—

"A sub-committee of the Conjoint Board of Scientific Societies has been for some time engaged in considering the future of the International Catalogue of Scientific Literature.

"As the outcome of several meetings the sub-committee is prepared to recommend that all papers and books dealing with both pure and applied science should be catalogued by authors and subjects, and that it is more practicable for such a catalogue to be prepared by a single country than by an international organisation.

"In order to bring this about, the sub-committee is considering a plan for the establishment of a central institution in London which shall assemble all the material required to be catalogued, and shall prepare from it cards showing (1) author; (2) title; (3) date and full references; (4) branch of science."

It will be noted that the committee has quietly put the International Catalogue and its organisation aside, and has acted as if the former were a negligible quantity and the catalogue defunct!

The history of the International Catalogue is briefly as follows. In 1893 the Royal Society was memorialised to take into consideration the preparation of complete author and subject catalogues, by international co-operation, in continuation of the society's Catalogue of Scientific Papers, which the society did not propose to continue beyond the century. The proposal being viewed with favour, the Royal Society solicited the opinion of scientific workers all over the world. There was practically but one reply—that such catalogues were essential, and almost universal agreement that the only way of carrying the work into execution was by international co-operation. Representative committees were appointed, and after two years of very hard work a scheme was prepared which was forwarded abroad, together with the invitation to attend the first international conference on the subject. This was held in July, 1896. Two subsequent international conferences were held in London in October, 1898, and June, 1900. All three were highly representative. Ultimately it was decided, at the third conference, to establish the catalogue as an international enterprise. Work was begun in 1901, and has been continued up to the present time. The organisation has grown steadily in weight and efficiency, and at the beginning of the war there were thirty-four regional bureaux in operation. The harmony which has prevailed throughout among the nations is one of the most remarkable features of the enterprise: notwithstanding the complexity of the work, there has not been the slightest friction. I believe no other international enterprise of like magnitude has been called into existence or worked more smoothly.

There is no doubt that the original establishment of the organisation was effected almost solely owing to the prestige of the Royal Society. The society has always been the responsible publishing agent, and is therefore financially liable.

The one chief difficulty in the way, which has retarded the work, has been the lack of working capital, owing to the fact that most Governments will only pay for the volumes after delivery. This has been met in part by a rather heavy loan from the Royal Society, on which interest has to be paid. The late Dr. Mond was one of the most ardent supporters of the catalogue and a convinced believer in international co-operation as the only effective means of producing a satisfactory result; he bequeathed a large sum to the Royal Society. I know that one of the chief objects he had in mind was to enable the society, when the bequest became available, to release the international enterprise from its indebtedness, and generally to promote the undertaking.

As war went on, it became necessary for the society to evaluate its responsibilities towards the catalogue. It was decided that the society could not guarantee the publication of the catalogue beyond the fourteenth issue. An issue consists of seventeen volumes, each dealing with a separate science. The fourteenth issue is now being published, and it is noteworthy that special contributions in aid of publication have been made by the Carnegie Foundation of New York, by the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, and by certain private donors.

The Royal Society has also undertaken the direct control of the enterprise during the period of the war. Early last year it was intimated to workers abroad that the future of the catalogue must be left for the decision of an international council to be called as soon as possible after the conclusion of peace.

Why the Conjoint Board has intervened is not clear. It certainly has no right to give the catalogue its quietus. That it should have taken the action it has *without ever consulting the international organisation* passes belief. I attended the meeting of the board on Wednesday last, and protested most strongly against the discourtesy the sub-committee has displayed towards our Allies and the neutral countries concerned in the enterprise.

It is unnecessary to dwell on the special need at the present time of maintaining and cementing relationships that have been so happily established, and to comment further on the unhappy policy adumbrated by the sub-committee.

HENRY E. ARMSTRONG,
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Mercury's Perihelion Progress.

IF Mercury sweeps up solar matter in its course round the sun—such matter as yields the Zodiacal light, for example—there will be no effect on its transverse or centripetal acceleration, but it will experience tangential retardation. This, if uniform, so that $m=a+b\theta$, would give a spiral character to the orbit; but if the sweeping up were periodic, with the planet's

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period, the orbit would suffer cumulative perturbations of the ordinary *de* and *edϖ* type.

Now, considering the eccentricity of Mercury's orbit, it seems quite possible that at perihelion it may sweep up more matter than at aphelion; and, if so, the perturbation caused would be roughly parallel to the minor axis, so that it would give a large *edϖ* and a small *de*. Which is what is wanted.

Perhaps also the fact that the Zodiacal light is best seen from the earth's position early in March indicates that the hypothetical matter extends mainly in the direction of Mercury's perihelion, which corresponds with the position of the earth early in December, for that would be at right angles to the March line of vision.

Probably this idea, in some form or other, has been already mooted by astronomers in connection with Mercury's outstanding discrepancy, and rejected by them on the ground that no sweeping up of matter was permissible which would exert any perceptible influence on the periodic time. It may be questioned, however, whether such minute influence could be recognised, otherwise than by its cumulative syntonic fluctuations, if it had been on the average uniform throughout recent centuries.

March 11. OLIVER LODGE.

The British Association and the Nation.

MAY I, as an outsider deeply interested in the organisation and use of competent knowledge in the nation's business, thank NATURE for the note in its issue of March 7 on the decision of the council of the British Association to suspend for yet another year the association's corporate life? I do not challenge the opinion of the Cardiff Committee, nor would I criticise the disinclination of the council, when so many of its prominent members are working hard at urgent problems, to hold a meeting of the customary peace type. But why should there not be a meeting suitable to a time of war and of real peril? Would it not be wise to show that the association stands for something in the stress of a great storm? I would respectfully suggest that a two days' meeting be arranged this year in London, and that two things be attempted thereat:—

(1) To elicit authoritative statements, so far as they can be made, of the services scientific men have rendered the country they have done so much to save from extinction, the extent to which these services have been improvised, and the circumstances in which they have been contributed.

(2) To make possible equally cogent statements illustrative of the future dependence of this country upon competent and organised knowledge, and hard and persistent effort on scientific lines, if its people are to be fit for their place and equal to their duty.

Facts are abundant; demonstrators are available; the time is opportune; the audiences are assured.

Imagine the verdict if nothing of this sort is attempted; a verdict passed on its own purpose by the British Association. The material interests can have their conferences—political, financial, industrial. Even the occupational categories can assemble, be voluminously reported and advertised, and pass resolutions of interminable length on matters far removed either from their knowledge or their experience. One interest only—that of competent and ascertained knowledge—the supreme need of an honest white race, fails the nation. Those who know are to be silent!

Will not that be the truth?

I feel certain that a group of students could easily put a different complexion on the matter, and I suggest that they should be permitted to try. As practically interested in administration, it would be a great privilege to assist in many ways open to me.

If the British Association, by reason of its constitution, finds it difficult to organise such a meeting, are there no other associations or groups of workers who will play their part? J. J. ROBINSON.

The West Sussex Gazette, Arundel, March 11.

Whales and Seals as Food.

MUCH correspondence has recently taken place regarding the use of whale flesh as food, but the writers, regarding it as an experiment or as a last resort, have overlooked the fact that for centuries it formed a regular diet of the islanders of Scotland. In both the western and northern isles the capture of the round-headed porpoise, or "ca'aing whale," has for long been a systematised industry, whenever opportunity offered, and indeed the earliest evidence of man's presence in Scotland, in Neolithic times, is associated with the demolition of a whale stranded on the shores of the Firth of Forth.

Seals also formed a staple food of the islanders, a slaughter of 200 or 300 being no unusual reward for a visit to Suleskerry, in the Orkneys, or to Haskeir, in the Outer Hebrides, during the eighteenth century. To this destruction is mainly to be attributed the decline of the grey seal in Scottish waters, which made necessary the legislative protection granted in 1914. In Martin's day (1703) the seal flesh was preserved for winter use, but difficulties accompanied the eating of it:—"The Natives salt the Seals with the ashes of burnt Sea Ware, and say they are good Food, the Vulgar eat them commonly in Spring time with a long pointed Stick instead of a Fork to prevent the strong smell which their Hands would otherwise have for several Hours after." It was not only the vulgar who feasted, however, for an innocent make-believe adapted the unusual fare to the palates of the great:—"The Seal, tho' esteemed fit only for the Vulgar, is also eaten by Persons of Distinction, though under a different name, to wit, Hamm." JAMES RITCHIE.

Edinburgh, March 15.

THE EDUCATION (NO. 2) BILL.

THE course of the debates in the House of Commons on Wednesday, March 13, and on Monday last, when the second reading was taken, augurs well for the passage of the new Education Bill into law. With one or two exceptions, which might in any circumstances have been expected, every speaker accepted cordially the proposals embodied in the measure, and some even went so far as to regret that more drastic changes had not been submitted, having regard to the grave position in which the nation finds itself, not merely from an industrial and commercial point of view, but also in respect of the responsibilities, personal and public, which the coming generation must perforce accept if we are to maintain and enhance our pride of place among the nations of the earth. Nothing is more gratifying to read in the course of an animated and informing debate than the all but unanimous demand from all parties for a better-paid teaching body with a much improved status. Without doubt the Bill is but a tentative measure, far exceeding, however, the most sanguine hopes of ardent

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